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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses problems and ethical issues in obtaining interview data from young children and presents the "phototalk" method (the use of photographs to facilitate interviews with young children). The method was used in a study of young children's transition to school. Four interviews were conducted with each child, with the first and fourth using photographs. The first interview incorporated 31 photographs of students and teachers involved in a range of activities at school. After talking with the parents while the child played with toys and became accustomed to the researcher's presence, the first interview with the child regarding their initial perceptions of school was conducted. The fourth interview was conducted at the end of their first year in school and concerned their confidence, friendships, perceptions of the home-school partnership, and thoughts about the approaching transition to the next grade. Specific questions were matched to the pictures. Findings indicated that photographs gave a focus to the interviews and kept the children's attention. The placement of photographs in an album seemed to influence the children's response. Children were most effectively interviewed in pairs, although this practice involved difficulty in recording both children's answers unless the interviews were tape recorded. Photographs were also helpful in building relationships with children. A problem with using photographs was the loss in eye contact. (KB)

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PHOTOTALK: INTERVIEWING YOUNG CHILDREN

ED 413 107

> ". . . there is now increasing recognition and acceptance that children's views and perspectives need to be heard both as an ethical imperative and also as a matter of practical utility and efficacy."
>
> (Davie and Galloway, 1996, p.3)

When gathering data for educational research there is a need to include children's voices as well as those of adults as they, surely, are experts when it comes to their own lives. However, one can seldom gather information by conventional methods when working with very young children. Questionnaires or structured interviews are possible with older children but a more practicable method is needed for four year olds (Malek, 1995, p.4), especially if they are not used to talking with adults or strangers.

A number of problems may arise when attempting to gain data from young children.

In an adult's presence they may:

- feel intimidated by the interview situation. Indeed, small children may not communicate at all unless they are in the company of their parents or friends (Wragg, 1984);
- be shy, embarrassed or show off, particularly if they are being interviewed in the presence of their parents;
- look for confirmation that they have given the 'right' answer or they may give 'silly' answers; and
- say what they think the interviewer wants to hear and not what they really think.

Their stage of development may lead them to:

- have an inability to express their thoughts and feelings in detail due to a lack of language;
- be unable to describe their reality as they may not yet have grasped the relationship between truth and words. This may lead to unreliability;

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- be unable to reflect beyond the immediate; and
- only have developed affective impressions rather than opinions.

Problems on the part of the interviewer may be:

- over- or under-estimating the child's intellectual level (Powney and Watts, 1987, p.21);
- bringing adult concepts to bear on the understanding of children's thoughts and actions;
- premature intervention rather than giving children time to consider their answers; and
- accepting children's thoughts and statements as autonomous and complete in themselves, although this raises the issue of how much to accept at face value.

ETHICAL ISSUES

When gathering data, interviewers need to accord children respect and dignity, treat their views seriously and encourage children to talk without putting pressure on them. There are power relationships between the researcher and the researched in that children are not always able to say 'no' to adults as they may have been 'trained' to do as they are told without question.

Robson (1993, p.32) raises the issue of whether a 'captive population' such as children can "rationally, knowingly, and freely give informed consent". When asking parents for their consent to talk to their child it is still important to ask the child too, and to establish whether or not their words can be used. This in itself raises questions of whether children have an understanding of what this means and implies, as well as the complex issue of data ownership.

There is also the difficulty of "eliciting a child's view without encouraging her/him to believe that this view will prevail or that it is necessarily valid" (Davie and Galloway, 1996, p.13). Although children need to be involved in the process it is not always practicable to take note of their view and implement it. However, it is important that the child feels his/her views are treated seriously and on those occasions when their ideas are implemented, children need to be asked if they want to be identified. A further problem is one of confidentiality which may arise if the child's parents or teachers ask the interviewer what the children said. We need to ask the children "can we tell mummy/teacher etc?" but this may put pressure on the child if they want to be honest with the interviewer, yet feel they cannot be open if they know that a particular aspect will be reported back to their parents or teacher.

METHOD

I was seeking children's perceptions about the transition to school before and after they started full time statutory education and needed a practicable method of gaining information about their views on four particular occasions:

1. With their parents before they started school;
2. Individually at school after they had attended school for half a term;
3. Individually, in their classroom at the end of their first term at school; and
4. Either individually or in pairs, at school, at the end of the reception year. (For some children this was also the end of their first term.)

The first interviews

When talking to children it is often their answers that determine the next question (Powney and Watts, 1987) so I needed to be clear about what it was that I wanted to ask the children but flexible in the route that I took through the key aspects. In the first interview these were:

1. Their notions of what a teacher does
2. What they thought happened in the classroom/at school
3. Their feelings about starting school
4. The purpose of school

A vehicle, other than conventional interview methods, was needed to elicit the voices of children in order to gain their views and understand their feelings about the nature and significance of the transition. One method was to use photographs of school to focus the interview.

I started by photographing children who were already at school in a range of situations and selecting photographs that were clear and which were 'typical' of a Reception classroom. The number of photographs I was to show the children was important as I wanted to get a balance between giving an impression of a day in school, yet not have so many that the child would lose interest. Eventually I chose thirty-one photographs and put them in a sturdy twenty-page album with laminated pages.

I needed to gain the child's perceptions of how they envisaged school to be, but first I had to set the scene. I was aware that at this stage I was a stranger in the child's home and that it was necessary to create conditions as quickly as possible that would help the

child to feel comfortable and confident in my presence (Powney and Watts, 1987). I took along a play pack that included books, a cuddly toy, a puppet, a drawing block and crayons. While I was interviewing their parent(s) the child was able to play with these whilst also becoming accustomed to what I looked and sounded like. When it came to the time to talk with the child I either sat with them on the floor or sat next to them on a settee. The seating arrangement was important in order to be on the same level. Using their name, eye contact and smiling were important in creating a trusting climate (Powney and Watts, 1987, p.97). I told each child that I wanted to find out what they thought their school was going to be like. I asked permission of them and their parents to tape record what they said and played it back to them afterwards if they wanted to hear the recording.

I wondered if I would get an honest response with the parent(s) present but I also felt that it was ethically correct to have them there. Occasionally a child would look to them for confirmation that their answer was acceptable but more often than not they would be engrossed in the photographs and ignore their parent(s). I usually found that the parents, too, wanted to see the photographs and gain an insight into school.

That children do not know 'the rules' of an interview situation became clear with one or two in that, as with many young children, their conversation went off at a tangent or they wanted to show me a particular toy which had no bearing on the topic in hand.

I started by asking the child if they knew of anyone else who was starting school with them and what they already knew about it. A focus was needed so I asked them to draw a picture of what they thought their teacher would look like. While they were drawing I asked what they thought a teacher does and what they thought s/he would be like. (For those children who did not want to draw, the first photograph in the album was of a teacher.) I asked what they thought their classroom might look like, and have in it, and what they thought happened at school. This was a difficult concept for young children so I explained that I had some photographs, for them to look at, of girls and boys at school. I used the photographs taken of classroom situations to ask "do you think you might be doing this when you go to school?". This gave a focus but did not always elicit the information I needed. I had deliberately left some pages blank and after they had looked at all the photographs, asked what activities they thought might be missing. This was a successful ploy as several children identified a number of areas that I had deliberately omitted such as sand-play and going on trips. I then asked what they were looking forward to most about school, how they felt about going and why they were going to go.

The next two interviews with the children took place at school and were semi-structured but without photographs.

The final interviews

Since the first interviews I had been pondering the notion of linking questions with photographs, so when it came to the interviews at the end of the Reception Year I decided to try this style of interview. I wanted to find out about the children's

1. Levels of confidence and how well they had settled.
2. Gained sociability (friendships).
3. Ability to make sense of school and become effective learners.
4. Perceptions of the home/school partnership.
5. Thoughts about the approaching transition from the Reception Year to Year One.

I used a different set of photographs and displayed them in a similar album to that used with the first interviews but this time I matched specific questions with particular photographs.

DISCUSSION

It is not the intention of this paper to analyse the children's responses but to consider the quality of information gained by using photographs in an interview situation.

Photographs as a visual stimulus certainly gave a focus to the interviews and kept the children's attention. They also 'freeze' time and this helped to identify particular issues that I wanted to discuss. The number of photographs used needed careful consideration. Too many and the children would have lost interest, too few and not enough information would have been gleaned.

In the first interviews the photographs were in an album with one picture per page and with some blank pages. The thickness of the album gave them an indication of the number but this also made some of them hurry through the final pictures as if it were a race to finish. I had considered using them individually or scattered on a surface, in

which case I would have mounted them onto card and covered them, otherwise they would have become damaged very quickly with the number of children using them.

Time needs to be considered when interviewing children. Nutbrown (1996, p.53) reminds us that "children have their own pace" and that "we need to be mindful of the need young children have to take their time". This is an important factor if we are to gain considered information, yet at the same time there is the dilemma of using time that has been allocated to school and children's learning. My second album of photographs and interviews took nearly twenty minutes to complete which was too long as some children were unable to concentrate for this length of time.

I found that children were best interviewed in twos. Being with a friend was less threatening and more comfortable for many children. Interviewing two children together worked well as they discussed their thoughts and could 'bounce' ideas off one another, although with some children they simply gave the same reply as their friend. Techniques to avoid this included asking "I'd like you each to tell me . . . " or "I'll ask A first and then B". There were difficulties in recording both children's answers at the same time but the gains of interviewing in pairs were sufficient to outweigh this problem. The interviews needed to be taped to help gain all the information offered and give the children a sense that their comments were valued.

Photographs were helpful in building relationships as, on later occasions, children associated me with photographs and asked if I had brought any, because they had enjoyed looking at them. They indicated that they could associate with the discussion

more easily and that photographs helped them in their thinking and in forming opinions.

One of the problems with using photographs is that eye contact is lost. However, this is not always a bad thing as 'parallel talk' while looking at photographs or drawing a picture encouraged the children to talk about issues of concern and helped some children to raise questions about particular aspects of school. For example, before they started school many children did not know about changing for PE and wanted to know why children took their clothes off at school. For others, at the end of the Reception Year, they were unaware of the role of adults at school, other than their class teacher and asked why there were so many other adults in school. The importance of friendships was an area where difficulties with 'falling out' with friends were raised by some children.

CONCLUSION

If ethnographic research in education is to reflect the view of each participant and gain different perspectives, children's voices also need to be heard. There is value in listening to children as they often see things that others miss in the home/school partnership. They also gain a sense of ownership for any decision-making that takes place and an understanding that their views are regarded with respect (Davie and Galloway, 1996, p.13). There is gain for the researcher too, because "by listening to their views we extend our knowledge of *their* perceptions of those experiences" (Charlton, 1996, p.50).

A suitable vehicle, therefore, needs to be found by which to gather information. As such, researchers may consider the use of non-verbal prompts such as photographs to stimulate the formulation of children's opinions and to control the focus of an interview.

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